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ABSTRACT

Productive board meetings entail well-planned agenda, effective chairpersons, and on-task focuses which avoid extraneous issues and fruitless, time-consuming discussions. Members should understand the agenda's chief points beforehand or be prepared to make pertinent inquiries which administrators anticipate. Tips for chairpersons include keeping members informed about problems and insisting they reciprocate. Agenda building is an important superintendent task; proposed approaches vary from giving each topic its own page and recommendation rationale, to printing motions closely following recommendations, providing space for members to tabulate voting records, and including topic-related board policies, statutes, or regulations. Sources for further investigation follow. (KS)

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HOW TO CONDUCT PRODUCTIVE AND NOT-TOO-LONG BOARD MEETINGS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association, Houston, Texas, March 31-April 3, 1984.

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HOW TO CONDUCT PRODUCTIVE AND NOT-TOO-LONG BOARD MEETINGS

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The key to productive meetings that make maximum use of meeting time is a well planned agenda, a good chairperson and an "on-task" focus by board members. Since this is a "HOW TO" panel, my comments may seem rather directive but they are not really meant to be totally perscriptive. I realize, as you do, that each school situation is somewhat different from others. Because of varing factors, one can hardly devise a recipe that will always bake the same cake. With this proviso in mind lets first look at the "on-task" focus that I mentioned.

Attention to time-on-task need not stop at the classroom door. School board members, as well as, school children can benefit from concentrating on the subject before them. It doesn't make any difference if it is algebra or school board policy. Time-on-task is just as important for board members as it is for students. "How-To" eliminate rambling discourses that seem to go everywhere and nowhere at the same time, is often a problem. Board members should not be side-tracked on extraneous issues. Statements should be limited to the agenda item being discussed.

It is not just time on task that is important; because some board members and administrators seem to talk about the subject forever and still never get to the essential aspect of the problem. It is "focused" time-on-task that is important. Focused time is spent clarifying what the problem really is and then determining if resolution can be reached at the meeting. If this is not possible, ask for more information, table the issue, then get on with the other business of the meeting. Aimless and fruitless discussion takes valuable time and gives an aura of ineffectiveness to the meeting. After all, the board meeting is the best way the public has to make judgments about how business-like their business is being conducted. Get on with it and if you can't do that postpone dealing with the problem until everything is ready. That's an important "How-To."

Another "How-To" is for the administration and board members to do their homework before the meeting. Members need to read their agenda. They need to understand the essential points. If they do not, they need to poise well thought out questions. Questions that get to the heart of the matter and also help others understand what is at issue.

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The administration should anticipate these questions and be prepared with answers, data or evidence that will serve to clarify and move the discussion to an informed vote. Of course, much of this can be avoided if the agenda is well prepared. Most questions in this area are raised over incomplete cost projections; lack of research; timing; inadequate information; and relationship to policy.

Some districts have study sessions for the purpose of clarifying the impact of various agenda items. Others do the same thing through informal discussions between the board members and superintendents. Some boards use sub-committees for this purpose. The point, regardless of how it is achieved, is that doing homework will help boards become more effective and keep meetings shorter. Focusing on time-on-task is a good "How-To" help achieve the goal of productive and shorter meetings.

The chairperson of the meeting is another key to conducting productive and shorter meetings.

Mr. Mallory deals with some very important aspects of this job in one part of his presentation. To his thoughts, I would like to add some helpful tips that come from Michael McHamer of Larmie, Wyoming. These hints were published in the July, 1980 issue of the American School Board Journal:

1. "-Encourage the superintendent to come to you with any problems he might have. Neither he nor you should wait to address problems until they come up at public meetings.

2. -Keep other board members informed about special issues and problems, and insist they keep you informed about their concerns.

3. -Direct everything possible through proper channels, and avoid taking on any matter until you consult your policy covering that issue.

4. -Know the difference between policy (the board's responsibility) and administrative procedures (your superintendent's responsibility) and help the rest of the board make this distinction during and between meetings.

5. -Make sure all board members receive adequate background information on agenda items before school board meetings.

6. -Conduct all meetings-both public meetings and executive sessions-using good parlimentary procedure. This can help avoid lawsuits, bad feelings, and misunderstandings.

7. -Know when board members are ready to act on a matter and when they need more time to debate. This knowledge comes from both experience and instinct.

8. -When you call for a vote, state the issue you are voting on immediately beforehand to make sure there's no chance of confusion.

9. -Announce results of all votes. Avoid secret ballots.

10. -Shield board members, administrators, and teachers from personal attacks at meetings by calling persons attempting to make such attacks out of order.

11. -Remember board members are the only members of the school community legally empowered to make school policy decisions. Resist attempts from outside groups to usurp that power.

12. -Discuss as much business as possible in open meetings. Executive sessions should be kept to a minimum.

The last suggestions I want to make today about conducting productive and not-too-long board meetings relates to agenda building.

Building the agenda for the next school board meeting is one of the most important jobs of the superintendent. Incidentally, studies show that the input from superintendents plays the major role in determining what, when, where, and who appear on the agendas.

With 15,000 school superintendents constructing agendas for their boards, it is easy to see that there is no commonly accepted agenda format. Agendas vary from a short list of items to be discussed to a notebook filled with explanations, details, and recommendations. The fact that all these different approaches seem to be working satisfactorily is an indication of the diversity between and among our superintendents and districts.

This does not mean that many agendas cannot be improved. The ideas that follow were garnered from superintendents and districts in all parts of our country.

ONE TOPIC - ONE PAGE

Some superintendents follow the approach of keeping each topic on its own page. While, to some, this may seem like a waste of paper, it does keep the attention of those following the agenda focused on the topic. When the topic is listed at the top of the page, the next item-usually indicated the name

of the person who requested the item be placed on the agenda. When this becomes part of standard procedure, board members seem to appreciate knowing the origin of requests.

Another topic consideration appreciated by board members is the inclusion of the various alternatives considered by the superintendent before arriving at his/her recommendation. It is also possible to leave a small space on the page to accommodate a more viable alternative that may arise from discussion at the meeting.

Seldom should a topic be considered without an Impact Statement that describes the anticipated impact on the children, the facilities, the personnel, or the finances of the district. Such a statement helps put and keep various proposals in perspective. It makes it easier for everyone involved to think in terms of relative importance and priorities. Where a rationale for the superintendent's recommendation is used, superintendents report that it eliminates some questions about the appropriateness of the recommendation.

MOTIONS

Some agendas have motions that closely follow the superintendent's recommendation printed in the agenda, leaving space for the names of the members who make and second the motion. This has several advantages. Everyone is working from the printed word and changes are easy to pencil in. It also gives the recordkeeping board member an accuarte reference.

When printed motions are used, it is often a good idea to provide space for an alternative motion. This indicates that the administration is willing to accept all ideas and that a better solution may develop from board discussion.

ACTION

Some agendas provide space for each board member, as well as the official minute keeper, to keep tract of the way everyone votes on each topic. For boards that prefer to act in unity, this clearly demonstrates unity. For board members who are interested in seeing that their positions on particular issues are clear, this little tabulation serves the purpose.

BOARD POLICY

Perhaps the most viable idea arising from studies of agendas is the idea of associating each board topic with the applicable board policy, statutes, or regulations. Including the policy that applies to the topic under consideration

clearly points that the board's principal responsibility is policy review and construction.

The inclusion of applicable state and federal statutes as well as rules and regulations from other agencies aid those involved to understand that some actions must be taken simply to comply with these things, and that little or no recourse is available.

The back of the previous agenda page can be used for further background information, to record additional board or public input, or to further delineate the board policy.

These ideas were not found in existing agenda format; they are simply the result of putting various ideas from different districts together. School leaders should excerise caution in changing existing agenda building practices that are working well.

Suggested Sources for Further Investigation

1. N.S.B.A. Policy Services
2. N.S.B.A. Films, On Board and Board Action
3. MacFeely, Richard W. (1984, January). Smooth The Way to Great Board Meetings. American School Board Journal, p.35.
4. Anderson, Stuart A., (1983) Successful School Board Meetings. Stringfield, Illinois: Illinois Association of School Boards, 1209 South Fifth Street, 62703. (A Book)

COMBINATION OF SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR AGENDA BUILDING

AGENDA TOPIC _____

On the agenda at the request of _____

Alternatives

A.

B.

Other Alternatives

Impact Statement

Superintendent's Recommendation

Rationale

Motion: It was moved by _____ and seconded

by _____.

Action: SMITH Y/N JONES Y/N ADAMS Y/N DOE Y/N
WASHINGTON Y/N

Passed _____ Failed _____

Applicable Board Policy, State Law or Regulation .....